

# COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS BETWEEN THE OBJECTIVE AND THE SUBJECTIVE QUALITY OF LIFE APPROACH – STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES

**Constantinescu Mihaela**

*Academy of Economic Studies Bucharest Marketing Faculty*

**Moise Daniel**

*Academy of Economic Studies Bucharest Marketing Faculty*

*Quality of Life (QOL) can be defined as the degree in which the objective needs of an individual are satisfied in relation with the subjective perspective of his well-being. Thus, there are two different approaches in QOL evaluation: the objective approach (which analyzes the quality of life through economic indicators) and the subjective approach (which evaluates quality through the individual's opinion and actions). There isn't a widely accepted view referring to the use of one of those two QOL approaches, each having a series of strengths and weaknesses. This paper presents a comparative analysis of the advantages and disadvantages brought by these two approaches in QOL studies. The objective analysis has a series of strengths (among which we mention the fact that allows valide comparisons and the fact that doesn't depend on individuals perception), but has also a series of weaknesses, starting with the dependence on statistical data, which in many cases has incomplete registrations, and ending with the fact that doesn't reflect the real value of the well-being perceived by population. The motives for which the QOL subjective approach is promoted, therefore its strenghts, refer to the fact that it reflects important experiences for each individual and the fact that it reveals how macroeconomic policies satisfy the individual's needs. Certainly, this type of QOL analysis has also some weaknesses, like the lack of validity and accuracy in the data collected through surveys. Considering all the above, there is a conclusion with a wide application in the present context of the economy: we can't make a clear delineation between the two QOL approaches, moreover we can state the fact that there is a strong correlation between those two. Thus, the most precise systems of quality of life evaluation are those which use both objective, and subjective indicators, reaching a high level of aggregation at the national and international level.*

*Keywords: Quality of Life, Objective Approach, Subjective Approach, Strenghts, Weaknesses*

*Cod JEL: I31*

## **1. Introduction**

Quality of Life (QOL) can be defined as the degree in which the objective needs of an individual are satisfied in relation with the subjective perspective of his well-being. This concept has gained theoretical valences in the first part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when the society has realized the need for a concrete evaluation of the qualitative level that characterizes the standard of living of the population.

The starting point in the QOL development in the United States was represented by the fact that, although in full economic growth, the society was confronting with an increase in violence, criminality and public disorder. The economic growth was enough anymore in describing the quality of life, therefore in order to judge well-being of a nation had to use also social indicators. The source of QOL research is represented by the emergence of consciousness that economic growth doesn't necessarily bring wealth and happiness (Bălătescu 2009).

In Romania, QOL studies appeared in the early '70, when our country was trying to delimit itself from the soviet political power, fact that favored the promotion of accidental concepts, such as the concern for well-being and quality of life (Mărginean 2004:19). These concepts were somehow promoted even by State institutions, in order to highlight the desire to be much closer to the Occident.

## **2. Literature Review**

Given the nature more practical than theoretical of the quality of life, there are much more practical studies of the phenomenon. Thus, there are a number of authors who have focused on measuring quality of life at the national level, from whom we can mention Mark Rapley (2003), Kenneth D. Keith (2001), Ed Diener and Eunkook Suh (1997) or Jonathan Perry (1995). Equally in number or higher are the studies developed by several organizations acting in the social sector, such as OECD, UNESCO, WHO, Eurofound (European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions), ISQOLS (International Society for Quality-of-Life Studies). Some institutes have developed even their own system of QOL measurement: International Living (Quality of Life Index), Institute for Risk Research Canada (Life Quality Index), The Economist Intelligence Unit (Quality-of-Life Index), Mercer - Human Resource Consulting (Quality of Living survey).

These studies have highlighted the fact that the practice has developed such that the quality of life can not be approached anymore in theory as a whole, but rather separately, taking into consideration its factors of influence. Thus, there are two different approaches in QOL evaluation: the objective approach (which analyzes the quality of life through economic indicators) and the subjective approach (which evaluates quality through the individual's opinion and actions).

The need to make a differentiation in QOL approach is present even in the early '70 papers, when the specialists were preoccupied with the population's level of satisfaction regarding their living conditions (Stagner 1970: 59-68). However, a direct preoccupation with the objective/subjective duality can be found starting with the work of Siri Naess (1999) and Robert Cummins (2000), joined later by Joar Vittersø (2004) or Bernhard Christoph and Heinz-Herbert Noll (2003).

The subjective approach of analyzing the living standards has emerged as necessary variant due to the fact that the nations level of development was evaluated a long period of time almost exclusively through economic indicators. Consequently, even when the transition's effects were from the most painful ones, the economists insisted that the macroeconomic adjustments must be followed without any hesitation or remorse (Bălătescu 2007: 26). Starting from the idea that the economic indicators reveal only a limited part of a nation's progress, the subjective indicators are more and more present in the scientific literature, but also in practical QOL studies.

Of course there are criticisms brought to both QOL approaches. Those specialists that critic the objective analysis argue that a simple evaluation of the national level of development using economic indicators doesn't present a detailed image of the quality of life perceived by population.

The counterargument of those who critic the subjective approach starts from the fact that evaluating QOL through the level of satisfaction is actually showing the measure in which the individual has adapted to the present living conditions (Stiglitz 2002: 25).

### 3. Comparative analysis between the objective and the subjective QOL approach

Considering the facts presented above, emerges the need to identify the strenghts and weaknesses of the two QOL approaches. Table no. 1 contains a detaliated presentation of those elements, the starting point being E. Diener and E. Suh paper „Measuring quality of life: Economic, social and subjective indicators” (1997), to which were added the elements identified in the most relevant QOL definitions.

*Table no. 1. Strenghts and weaknesses for the two QOL approaches*

	Strengths	Weaknesses
O B J E C T I V E	a) Allows valid comparisons	a) Incomplete statistical registrations
	b) Full acceptance of the indicators sense or value from the society	b) Different ways of measurement and interpretation for a macroeconomic statistical indicator
	c) The characteristics can be measured with precision	c) Indicators with a negative connotation may have different interpretations in different countries
	d) Doesn't depend on people's perception	d) Compromise between two objective indicators
S U B J E C T I V E		e) Doesn't reflect the real value of the well-being perceived by population
	a) Reflects important experiences for each individual	a) The lack of validity and accuracy for the data collected with surveys
	b) Measurement indicators are more easily modifiable	b) The influence perceived depending on the macroeconomic predictions
	c) Reflects the degree in which individual's needs are satisfied by the macroeconomic policies	c) The variability (both between individuals, and for the same individual between different periods of time)

*Made by author*

The **strengths** of the *objective* approach refer to the following theoretical and practical aspects:

- because it uses international accepted indicators, *it allows valid comparisons* both from the geographic perspective (comparisons between regions, countries or continents), and from the temporal one (evaluating how the objective indicators have evolved from period to period reflects the level of development of a region, country or continent);
- the objectivity of the used indicators leads to a *full acceptance of their sense or value from the society*; having a clear delimitation between the indicators with a negative connotation (such as infant mortality rate) and the ones with a positive connotation (literacy, for example);
- in a objective QOL evaluation we use mostly quantitative indicators, fact that *offers precision to the measurement techniques*;
- maybe the most mentioned strength for the objective QOL analysis is the fact that doesn't depends on people's perception, therefore there is no subjectivity in evaluating quality of life.

In return, there are a series of **weaknesses** for the *objective* QOL evaluation:

- outlining a general index for QOL evaluation depends largely on the statistical registration made by each country, fact that can become an inconvenient because of the *incomplete statistical data* (there are countries in which the census doesn't have the same accuracy because of the impossibility to register some data, but also because of the people's reluctance to declare the real state of their life);
- although it's using international accepted indicators, the objective QOL evaluation is negatively influenced by the *different ways of measurement and interpretation for a macroeconomic statistical indicator* (for example, self-consumption and its influence on GDP);
- different cultures between countries can lead to *different interpretations for indicators with a negative connotation*, such as criminality, deforestations or gender equality;
- at the macroeconomic level, the policies adopted in order to improve the quality of life can sometimes lead to a series of *compromises between the objective indicators*; in order to obtain a certain level of economic development a series of recovery measures are taken, fact that in some cases means the scarifications of lower importance indicators; for example, in order to lower the infant mortality rate from 5/1000 to 1/1000 are necessary major investments in the medical system, investments that in many cases the government is redirecting to other domains with a higher importance for that period of time (Diener și Suh 1997: 196);
- the most important weakness for the objective evaluation refers to the fact that *it doesn't reflect the real value of the well-being perceived by population*, considering the fact that a economic developed society doesn't necessary mean a higher level of satisfaction for all individuals from that society (many personal or temporal factors can negatively influence the well-being of an individual).

The *subjective* approach on quality of life has also some **weakness**, such as:

- considering the fact that it represents an analysis at the individual's level, this approach *reflects important experiences for each individual*, fact that adds a plus to understanding the manner in which quality of life is perceived by each person;

- if an inadequacy is found in the subjective QOL measurement, *researchers can easily make rapid changes for the next studies*, trying to improve the instruments and adapt them to the data that is collected, thing that is not possible in a short period of time in the objective evaluation;
- through direct researches within the population, the subjective QOL evaluation *reflects the degree in which individual's needs are satisfied by the macroeconomic policies*.

As mentioned early, there are a series of criticisms brought to the **subjective** evaluation also, considering the following **weaknesses** that characterize this approach:

- the fact that this type of QOL evaluation uses interviews at the individual's level, we can register a *lack in validity and accuracy for the data collected*; most problems emerge from the fact that the subjective analysis uses surveys, this type of research being characterized, first of all, by a margin of error, and second, by a partial lack of information veracity;
- the subjective evaluation may be *influenced by the macroeconomic predictions*, considering the fact that the level of satisfaction is influenced by the optimism or pessimism that characterizes a person; the evaluation will have a better result if it's made in a economic context that is compared with the previous one that was less favorable; however, if the national policy concentrates on the present problems within the society, the comparison item for the individual also change, leading in most cases to a poorer QOL evaluation (Diener and Suh 1997: 196);
- evaluation quality of life only in a subjective manner can not lead to pertinent comparison within the society, considering the fact that such an evaluation is characterized by a *higher level of variability* (both between individuals, and for the same individual between different periods of time); each individual perceives in a different manner the events around him, giving them a greater or lesser importance depending on his expectations and needs; moreover, for the same person, the evaluation can vary from a period of time to another, depending on the modifications occurred in his life, fact that changes to some extent his priorities.

Considering all the strengths and weaknesses presented so far, the experience of the developed countries demonstrates the necessity of a higher coordination between the economic components and the social ones. We can not obtain spectacular results in economy as long as the social sector doesn't receive the proper attention.

Thus, in the scientific literature there are more and more frequent the research models that evaluate quality of life both in an objective and a subjective approach. Among the first authors to highlight such a model is Wolfgang Zapf (1984), who presents in his book "Living Conditions and the Perceived Quality of Life: Individual Well-being" a model that is based on the duality objective/subjective, leading to a more appropriate classification of the QOL level for the individual within the society.

#### 4. Conclusions

As can be seen from the comparison of the objective and subjective QOL approach, we can not make a clear delimitation between these two; moreover we can state the fact that these approaches are interrelated. In this respect, E. Diener and E. Suh (1997) highlighted

that a thorough understanding of the subjective QOL requires the understanding how the objective conditions influence the individual's evaluation of his living conditions.

A pertinent analysis for the quality of life takes into consideration both aspects: the macroeconomic analysis and the individual's evaluation. The starting point is the identification of the objectives elements that describe the current level of the economic and social development of a nation, fact that represents the ground for the development of a social policy that promotes QOL improvement. The second stage is a subjective analysis for the quality of life, the focus being on the standard of living and individual's well-being, on how he adapted to the living conditions offered by the society.

## 5. Bibliography

1. Bălțătescu, Sergiu. *Quality of Life. 1<sup>st</sup> Course– Quality of Life Conceptualizations*. Oradea: University of Oradea, [www.sergiubaltatescu.info](http://www.sergiubaltatescu.info) (accessed on 6 Jan 2011), 2009.
2. Bălțătescu, Sergiu. „Subjective Well-Being in the New EU Countries: a Comparative Trends Evaluation”. *Romanian Sociology* V, 3 (2007): 23-41.
3. Christoph, Bernhard and Noll, Heinz-Herbert. „Subjective Well-Being in the European Union during the 90s”, *Social Indicators Research* 64, 3 (2003): 521-546.
4. Cummins, Robert. „Objective and Subjective Quality of Life: an Interactive Model”, *Social Indicators Research* 52 (2000): 55-72.
5. Diener, Ed and Suh, Eunkook. „Measuring Quality of Life: Economic, Social and Subjective Indicators”, *Social Indicators Research* 40, 1-2 (1997): 189-216.
6. Keith, Kenneth. „International Quality of Life: Current Conceptual, Measurement, and Implementation Issues”, *International Review of Research in Mental Retardation* 24 (2001): 49-73.
7. Mărginean, Ioan. *Quality of Life in Romania*. Bucharest: Expert Publishing House, 2004.
8. Naess, Siri. „Subjective Approach to Quality Of Life”, *Feminist Economics* 5, 2(1999): 115-118.
9. Noll, Heinz-Herbert. „Social Indicators and Social Reporting: The International Experience”, paperwork presented at *The Symposium on Measuring Well-being and Social Indicators*, Canadian Council on Social Development, Ottawa, <http://www.ccsd.ca/noll1.html> (accessed on the 17th February 2011), 1996
10. Olson, Geraldine and Schober, Brigitte. „The Satisfied Poor: Development of an Intervention-oriented Theoretical Framework to Explain Satisfaction with a Life in Poverty”, *Social Indicators Research* 28 (1993): 173–193.
11. Rapley, Mark. *Quality of Life Research: a Critical Introduction*. UK: Sage Publications Ltd., 2003.
12. Felce, David and Perry, Jonathan. „Quality of Life: Its Definition and Measurement”, *Research in Developmental Disabilities* 16, 1 (1995): 51-74.
13. Stagner, Ross. „Perceptions, Aspirations, Frustrations, and Satisfaction: An Approach to Urban Indicators”, *the ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 388, 1(1970): 59-68.
14. Stiglitz, Joseph. „Employment, Social Justice and Societal Well-being”, *International Labour Review* 141, 1-2 (2002): 9-29.



15. Vittersø, Joar. „Subjective Well-Being Versus Self-Actualization: Using the Flow-Simplex to Promote a Conceptual Clarification of Subjective Quality of Life”, *Social Indicators Research* 65, 3 (2004): 299-332.
16. Zapf, Wolfgang. *Living Conditions and the Perceived Quality of Life: Individual Well-Being*, published in W. Glatzer/W. Zapf (Ed.) - *Quality of Life in the Federal Republic*. Frankfurt a. M. and New York: Campus, 1984

### **Acknowledgment**

This work was co-financed from the European Social Fund through Sectoral Operational Programme Human Resources Development 2007-2013, project number POSDRU/1.5/S/59184 „Performance and excellence in postdoctoral research in Romanian economics science domain”.